



Title: Living Faithful and Free

Text: Romans 14:13-15:13

Date: July 9, 2023

Main Idea: The “strong” conscience should defer to the “weak” conscience so as to not place a stumbling block before them and for the unity of the church – to worship God with the unity of one voice.

Lecture Tip: If your style is largely lecture style, you can use the headings and questions to make your main points for the text. Then as you teach, you could follow-up with application and apply questions sprinkled into the explanation of the text in your teaching.

Personal Study Guide

READ ROMANS 14:13-15:13

Highlight – What stands out?

1. Romans 14:13-23 continues to speak to practical instruction on what Christian love looks like. These passages speak to the strong not to distress or damage the weak. Reciprocal duties between the strong and weak are listed in 14:13, 14:19, and 15:7. What are those duties?
2. What leads to arguing among Jews and Gentiles? What are they disputing?
3. What repeated words or phrases do you notice?

Read the passage again. Try to notice the structure based on these three sets of verses:

Romans 14:13-23: What is the main idea?

Romans 15:1-6: What is the main idea?

Romans 15:7-13: What is the main idea?

Explain – What does this mean?

Let's explore some context to help understand why this might be a struggle for the Roman believers.

1. Remember who the audience is for this letter. What is big divide that Paul is addressing here? Which two groups are trying to worship together?
2. Look up Acts 10:9-33. What struggle did Peter have that this event helped him overcome? How does it relate to this passage?

“Stumbling block” and “stumble” are used in 14:13 and 14:21. [Kruger]

- a. **Leviticus 19:4 – Moses commands the people to not put a literal stumbling block in the way of the blind. Kruger states that this literal stumbling block is likely the background for the metaphorical usage of the term throughout the bible**
 - b. **Stumbling block/stone is always negative in the Bible and usually metaphorical of sin.**
3. 14:19 commands us to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding”. 15:2 commands the strong to “please his neighbor for his good”.
 - a. Does this mean that we should be a “people-pleaser”?
4. Is there ever a time for the strong to assert their freedom? [Kruger]

- a. **See Matt 15:12-14** –
- b. **See Galatians 2:3-5** –
5. **See 1 Cor 8:4-6 and 1 Timothy 4:1-5.** In these instances, Paul is *teaching*. Is there a time for us to *teach* in this way? Is there a time to educate the conscience?
6. Romans 14:14 states “nothing is unclean in itself”. Is Paul saying that nothing is “off-limits” if ones conscience does not object to it? [Stott]
7. Romans 15:5 states “... to live in such harmony with one another,...”. Does this mean that Christians will agree on everything? If so, why did Paul spend so much time explaining how to bear with one another in our disagreements?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Stott refers to the phrase “ALL FOOD IS CLEAN” as the ‘slogan of the strong’. Can you picture a person in an argument, yelling over others, knowing that he is right, but at the same time trampling on the conscience of the weak?
 - a. Can you see how insisting on your liberty, and not being willing to sacrifice our own inclinations for the good of others can cause problems in the body of Christ?
 - b. Is it difficult to limit your liberty the way Paul commands in these passages?
2. In the context of these verses, would you say it is better to error on the side of freedom or on the side of sacrifice?
3. Paul is writing to the Romans specifically about food and drink that some consider clean and some consider unclean, based on the cultural and ceremonial issues of the time of his writing. Does the truth from this passage resonate with a “secondary” issue that Christian’s consciences disagree on today?

4. When we are faced with a “secondary issue” that is a matter of disagreement, do we approach it with a self-centered attitude or an others-centered attitude?

5. Do we see how a secondary issue can become a matter of faith and sin when a person violates their conscience, acting in opposition to their faith that God will provide for them and satisfy them?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Am I placing a “stumbling block” before my brothers in Christ of “weak” conscience in my public actions?

2. How can I actively “bear” with my brothers and “build up” my neighbor?

Teacher Tip in preparing your lesson. Try to summarize what Paul is saying in a few sentences before you read the commentary. That will help anchor your lesson, whether you're discussion style or lecture style. Then use the commentary to reinforce what you have personally learned from the text. The John Stott commentary below is a supplement to the F.F. Bruce commentary you were given in August.

Commentary: Taken from John Stott's commentary on Romans 14:13-15:13

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.

b. Do not offend or destroy the weak person (14:13b-23)

In this section as in the previous one it is our relationship to the weak which is mainly in mind. In spite of three 'one another' verses (13a, 19 and 15:7), which speak of reciprocal duties between the weak and the strong, the chief emphasis throughout is on the Christian responsibility of the strong towards the weak. The argument moves on, however, from how the strong should regard the weak to how they should treat them, that is, from attitudes (not despising or condemning them) to actions (not causing them to stumble or destroying them).

Instead of passing judgment on one another, Paul writes, *make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in your brother's way* (13b). There is a play on words in the Greek sentence, which contains a double use of the verb *krinein*, 'to judge'. 'Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment ...' (NEB). The judgment or decision which we are to make is to avoid putting either a hindrance (*proskomma*) or a snare (*skandalon*) in our brother's path and so causing him to trip and fall. But why? Paul goes on to lay two theological foundations for his exhortation, in addition to the four developed in verses 1-13a.

(i) Welcome him because he is your brother for whom Christ died (14-16)

Before deploying this argument for not harming the weaker brother or sister, however, Paul explains in very personal terms the dilemma which faces the strong. It is created by two truths in conflict with each other. First, *as one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced*, as strong Christians are when they have a good doctrine of creation,²² *that no food is unclean in itself* (14a). Paul's reference to the Lord Jesus probably does not mean that he is actually quoting him, although he is sure to have been familiar with Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over the clean and the unclean,²³ and with the risen Lord's word to Peter not to call unclean what God has made clean.²⁴ The reference seems to be more general ('All that I know of the Lord Jesus convinces me that ...', REB), and is also a claim to be in close personal union with Christ as his disciple and specially as his apostle. However he came to his conviction, it was that no food was in itself unclean. *But*, and this is the second part of the dilemma, *if anyone regards something as unclean*, because his conscience tells him it is, *then for him it is unclean* (14b), and he should not partake of it. Verse 14 refers, of course, to ceremonial or cultural (not moral) issues, for Paul is quite explicit that some of our thoughts, words and deeds are intrinsically evil.

The paradox, then, which faces the strong, is that some foods are both clean and unclean simultaneously. On the one hand, the strong are convinced that all foods are clean. On the other, the weak are convinced that they are not. How should the strong behave when two consciences are in collision? Paul's response is unambiguous. Although the strong are correct, and he shares their conviction because the Lord Jesus has endorsed it, they must not ride roughshod over the scruples of the weak by imposing their view on them. On the contrary, they must defer to the weaker brother's conscience (even though it is mistaken) and not violate it or cause him to violate it. Here is the reason: *If your brother is distressed* (feels grief and even pain) *because of what you eat*, not only because he sees you doing something of which he disapproves, but because he is induced to follow your example against his conscience, *you are no longer acting in love* (15a), no longer walking the path of love. For love never disregards weak consciences. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for them.²⁵ For to wound a weaker brother's conscience is not only to distress him but to 'destroy' him, and that is totally incompatible with love. *Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died* (15b).

Already twice Paul has referred to the weaker Christian as a 'brother' (10); now he repeats the epithet four more times (13, twice in 15, 21), and adds the poignant description *for whom Christ died*. Did Christ love him enough to die for him, and shall we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his

²² 1 Tim. 4:1ff.

²³ Mk. 7:14ff.

²⁴ Acts 10:15, 28.

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

²⁵ 1 Cor. 8:9ff.

conscience? Did Christ sacrifice himself for his well-being, and shall we assert ourselves to his harm? Did Christ die to save him, and shall we not care if we destroy him?

But what kind of 'destruction' does Paul have in mind? Professor Dunn claims that, 'as all recent commentators agree, what is in view ... is final eschatological ruin', meaning hell.²⁶ I beg to disagree, for four reasons. First, are we really to believe that a Christian brother's single act against his own conscience—which in any case is not his fault but the fault of the strong who have misled him, and which is therefore an unintentional mistake, not a deliberate disobedience—merits eternal condemnation? No, hell is reserved only for the stubborn, the impenitent, those who wilfully persist in wrongdoing (2:5ff.). Secondly, such a view (the eternal destruction of a brother) is inconsistent with the doctrine of final perseverance, which the apostle has eloquently expressed in 8:28–39, affirming that absolutely nothing can ever separate us from God's love. The hallmark of every authentic 'brother' or 'sister' is that he or she will, by God's steadfast love, persevere to the end. Thirdly, Paul writes in verse 15 that the strong are capable of destroying the weak; but Jesus said that God himself is the only person who can and will destroy people in hell.²⁷ Fourthly, the context demands a different interpretation of 'destroy'. *Apollymi* has a broad spectrum of senses which range from 'killing' to 'spoiling'. Here the opposite of to 'destroy' is to 'build up' (19f.; 15:2). Paul's warning, therefore, is that the strong who mislead the weak to go against their consciences will seriously damage their Christian discipleship. He urges the strong against causing such injury to the weak. *Do not allow what you consider good (i.e. the liberty you have found in Christ) to be spoken of as evil* (16), because you flaunt it to the detriment of the weak.

(ii) Welcome him because the kingdom of God is more important than food (17–21)

If the first theological truth which undergirds Paul's appeal to the strong for restraint is the cross of Christ, the second is the kingdom of God, that is, the gracious rule of God through Christ and by the Spirit in the lives of his people, bringing a free salvation and demanding a radical obedience. Although the kingdom of God is not as central a doctrine in the teaching of Paul as it was in the teaching of Jesus, it nevertheless occupies a prominent place.²⁸ The apostle's argument now is that, whenever the strong insist on using their liberty to eat whatever they like, even at the expense of the welfare of the weak, they are guilty of a grave lack of proportion. They are overestimating the importance of diet (which is trivial) and underestimating the importance of the

²⁶ Dunn, vol. 38B, p. 821.

²⁷ Mt. 10:28.

²⁸ E.g. Acts 14:22; 17:7; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; 1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:5; Col. 1:13.

kingdom (which is central). *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (17). Righteousness, peace and joy inspired by the Spirit are sometimes understood as the subjective conditions of being righteous, peaceful and joyful. But in the wider context of Romans it is more natural to take them as objective states, namely justification through Christ, peace with God and rejoicing in hope of God's glory (5:1f.), of which the Holy Spirit himself is the pledge and foretaste (8:23). And the reason for the greater significance of the kingdom is that *anyone who serves Christ in this way* (REB 'who shows himself a servant of Christ in this way'), who seeks first God's kingdom²⁹ and acknowledges 'that food and drink are secondary matters',³⁰ *is pleasing to God and approved by men* (18).

Verses 19–21 repeat, enforce and apply the same teaching about proportion or balance. They contain three exhortations. First, *let us therefore make every effort to do* (literally, 'let us then pursue') *what leads to peace and to mutual edification* (19). 'Peace' here seems to be the 'shalom' which is experienced within the Christian community, while 'edification' is building one another up in Christ. This is the positive goal which all should seek, and which the strong were neglecting in their insensitive treatment of the weak.

Secondly, *do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food* (20a). 'The work of God' could mean the individual weaker brother, but in the context it seems to refer to the Christian community. 'Destroy' translates a different verb from the one which Paul has used in verse 15. *Katalyō* means to 'tear down' or 'throw down', particularly in relation to buildings. It appears to be deliberately contrasted with the previous verse. Our responsibility is to seek to build up the fellowship (19), not to tear it down (20). And in particular we must not tear it down *for the sake of food*. In the Greek sentence this clause comes first. Surely 'for the sake of a plate of meat' (JBP) we are not going to wreck God's work! Already three times Paul has used a little irony to expose the incongruity of valuing food above peace, the health of our stomach above the health of the community; this is the fourth. Are you strong really prepared, he asks, to distress a brother *because of what you eat* (15a), to damage him spiritually *by your eating* (15b), to prize your *eating and drinking* above God's kingdom (17), and now to demolish God's work *for the sake of food* (20)?³¹ There must have been some red faces among the strong as they listened to Paul's letter being read out in the assembly. His gentle sarcasm showed up their skewed perspective. They would have to re-value their values, give up insisting on their

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

²⁹ Mt. 6:33.

³⁰ Barrett, p. 265.

JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).

³¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 8:8.

liberties at the expense of the welfare of others, and put the cross and the kingdom first.

Paul's third exhortation expresses a contrast between two kinds of behaviour, which he declares to be respectively 'wrong' and 'right', *kakos* (20b) and *kalos* (21). *All food is clean*, he affirms, a truth repeated from verse 14 except that the adjective is now *katharos* ('pure') not *koinos* ('common'), *but it is wrong (kakos) for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble* (20b). This being so, *it is better (kalos) not to eat meat or drink wine* (which is here mentioned for the first time) *or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall* (21). The statement that 'all food is clean' sounds like the slogan of the strong. And Paul agrees with it. Here is the theological truth which gave them their liberty to eat anything they liked. But there were other factors to consider, which would require them to limit the exercise of their liberty. In particular, there was the weaker brother or sister with the oversensitive, over-scrupulous conscience, who was convinced that not all food was clean. So it would be *evil* for the strong to use their liberty to harm the weak. Alternatively, it would be *good* for the strong (Paul drives the argument to its logical conclusion) to eat no meat and drink no wine, that is, to become vegetarians and total abstainers, and to go to any other extreme of renunciation, if that were necessary to serve the welfare of the weak.

Paul concludes (22–23) by drawing a distinction between belief and action, that is, between private conviction and public behaviour. So, he writes, as regards the private sphere, *whatever you believe about these things*, whether you are strong and believe you can eat anything, or weak and believe you cannot, *keep between yourself and God* (22a), keep it a secret. There is no need either to parade your views or to impose them on other people. As for public behaviour, there are two options, represented by two 'men' whom we quickly recognize as a strong and a weak Christian respectively. The strong Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, so that he can follow his conscience without any guilt feelings. *Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves* (22b). *But the man who has doubts*, that is, the weak Christian who is plagued with misgivings because his conscience gives him vacillating signals, *is condemned if he eats* (probably by his conscience, not by God), *because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith* (REB 'which does not arise from conviction') *is sin* (23). This final epigram exalts the significance of our conscience. Although, as we have seen, it is not infallible, it is nevertheless sacrosanct, so that to go against it (to act *not from faith*) is to sin. At the same time, alongside this explicit instruction not to violate our conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.

Paul comes next to his third negative deduction from the positive principle to 'accept' the weaker brother. Having urged the strong neither to despise and

judge him (14:2–13a), nor to distress and damage him (14:13b–23), he now exhorts them not to please themselves (15:1–13).

c. Do not please yourselves (15:1–13)

We who are strong, he begins. Thus for the first time he both identifies them by this name and at the same time identifies himself as one of them. What then ought the strong to do? What is their Christian responsibility towards the weak?

First, the strong *ought to bear with the failings* (literally ‘weaknesses’) *of the weak* (1a). Strong people are of course tempted to wield their strength to discard or crush the weak. Paul urges them instead to bear with them. The Greek verb *bastazō*, like the English verb ‘bear’, can mean either to ‘endure’ in the sense of ‘tolerate’, or to ‘carry’ and ‘support’. The context suggests that the latter is correct here. One person’s strength can compensate for another person’s weakness.

Secondly, *we who are strong ought ... not to please ourselves* (1b). To be self-centred and self-seeking is natural to our fallen human nature. But we ought not to use our strength to serve our own advantage. As Paul has been arguing, Christians with a strong conscience must not trample on the consciences of the weak.

Thirdly, *each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up* (2). Neighbour-pleasing, which Scripture commands,³² must not be confused with ‘men-pleasing’, which Scripture condemns.³³ In this pejorative sense, to ‘please men’, usually in antithesis to pleasing God, means to flatter people in order to curry favour with them, to win their approval by some unprincipled compromise. It is always incompatible with integrity and sincerity. Perhaps it is to avoid such a possible misunderstanding that Paul qualifies his appeal to please our neighbour with the clause *for his good, to build him up* (cf. 14:19). Instead of causing to stumble (14:13, 20, 21), tearing down (14:20) or damaging (14:15) our neighbour, we are to build him up. Edification is a constructive alternative to demolition. And this upbuilding of the weak will doubtless include helping to educate and so strengthen their conscience.

Once again Paul adds a theological foundation to his appeal. This time it concerns Jesus Christ himself, who is now mentioned in almost every verse, and in particular his example. Why should we please our neighbour and not ourselves?

(i) Because Christ did not please himself (3–4)

³² Lv. 19:18; cf. Rom. 13:9.

³³ E.g. Gal. 1:10; Col. 3:22; 1 Thes. 2:4.

This simple statement 'sums up with eloquent reticence both the meaning of the incarnation and the character of Christ's earthly life'.³⁴ Instead of pleasing himself, he gave himself in the service of his Father and of human beings. Although he, 'being in very nature God', had the greatest right of all persons to please himself, yet 'he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped' for his own advantage, but first 'emptied himself' (RSV) of his glory and then 'humbled himself' to serve.³⁵

Instead of referring specifically either to the incarnation or to some incident of his incarnate life, however, Paul quotes from Psalm 69, which vividly describes the unjust, unreasonable sufferings of a righteous man, and which is quoted of Christ four or five times in the New Testament, being regarded as a messianic prediction. Its verse 9 includes the words Paul quotes. *As it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me'* (3). That is to say, as an example of his refusing to please himself, Christ so completely identified himself with the name, will, cause and glory of the Father that insults intended for God fell upon him.

Christ's fulfilment of Psalm 69:9 leads Paul into a brief digression about the nature and purpose of Old Testament Scripture. *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope* (4). From this thoughtful statement it is legitimate to derive five truths about Scripture, which we would do well to remember.

First, its *contemporary intention*. The books of Scripture were of course primarily intended for those to and for whom they were *written in the past*. Yet the apostle is persuaded that they were also *written to teach us*.³⁶

Secondly, its *inclusive value*. Having quoted only half a verse from one psalm, Paul declares that *everything* written in the past is for us, although obviously not everything is of equal value. Jesus himself spoke of 'the more important matters of the law'.³⁷

Thirdly, its *Christological focus*. Paul's application of Psalm 69 to Christ is a fine example of how the risen Lord could explain to his disciples 'what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself'.³⁸

Fourthly, its *practical purpose*. Not only is it able to make us 'wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus',³⁹ but it can bring us *encouragement* with a view to *endurance*, so that *we might have hope*, looking beyond time to eternity, beyond present sufferings to future glory.

³⁴ Cranfield, vol. II, p. 732.

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

³⁵ Phil. 2:6ff.

³⁶ Cf. 1 Cor. 10:11.

³⁷ Mt. 23:23.

³⁸ Lk. 24:27; cf. Jn. 5:39.

³⁹ 2 Tim. 3:15.

Fifthly, its *divine message*. The striking fact that 'endurance and encouragement', which in verse 4 are attributed to Scripture, in verse 5 are attributed to God, can only mean that it is God himself who encourages us through the living voice of Scripture. For God continues to speak through what he has spoken.

(ii) Because Christ is the way to united worship (5–6)

Verses 5–6 are in the form of a benediction. Paul's prayer is that *the God who gives endurance and encouragement* (through Scripture, as we have seen) *may give you a spirit of unity among yourselves*, or literally, 'may give you to think the same thing among yourselves' (5a). This can hardly be a plea that the Roman Christians may come to agree with each other about everything, since Paul has been at pains to urge the weak and the strong to accept each other in spite of their conscientious disagreement on secondary matters. It must therefore be a prayer for their unity of mind in essentials.

For Paul's petition is this: *May ... God ... give you a spirit of unity ... as you follow Christ Jesus* (5b), literally 'according to Christ Jesus'. This seems to indicate that Christian unity is unity in Christ, that the person of Jesus Christ himself is the focus of our unity, and that therefore the more we agree with him and about him, the more we will agree with one another. But what is the purpose of this unity of mind? It is in order that (*hina*) we may engage in the common worship of God: *so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (6). Thus, the one mind (5) is expressed through the one heart and the one mouth (6); indeed without this unity of mind about Christ unity of heart and mouth in worship is impossible.

(iii) Because Christ accepted you (7)

With verse 7 Paul returns to the beginning, to his original and positive appeal for acceptance. Indeed, the long, closely reasoned, theological-practical argument about the strong and the weak (14:2–15:6) is sandwiched between the two cries, *Accept him* (14:1) and *Accept one another* (7a). Both are addressed to the whole congregation, although the first urges the church to welcome the weaker brother, while the second urges all church members to welcome each other. Both also have a theological base. The weak brother is to be accepted *for God has accepted him* (14:3), and the members are to welcome each other *just as Christ accepted you* (7a).

Moreover, Christ's acceptance of us was also *in order to bring praise to God* (7b). The entire credit for the welcome we have received goes to him who took the initiative through Christ to reconcile us to himself and to each other.

(iv) Because Christ has become a servant (8–13)

With verse 8 Paul slips almost imperceptibly from the unity of the weak and the strong through Christ to the unity of Jews and Gentiles through the same Christ. Further, in both cases the unity is with a view to worship, 'so that' they 'may glorify God' together (6, 9ff.). The grammar of verses 8–9 is uncertain, however. Here is the NIV text: *For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs (8) so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy (9a).*

What is clear is that there are two complementary clauses, the first about *the Jews and God's truth* (i.e. truthfulness), the second about *the Gentiles and his mercy*. But what is the relation between them? Many commentators suspend both clauses on the solemn opening words, *I tell you*. But because the context highlights the work of Christ, it seems better to suspend them on a longer introduction, namely, *I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews...* Then his role as the servant of the Jews, that is, as the Jewish Messiah, is seen to have two parallel purposes, first *to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs* and secondly to incorporate the Gentiles as well. His ministry to the Jews was *on behalf of God's truth*, to demonstrate his faithfulness to his covenant promises, whereas his ministry to the Gentiles was on account of *his mercy*, his uncovenanted mercy. For, although the Old Testament contains many prophecies of the inclusion of the Gentiles, and indeed the promise to Abraham was that the nations would be blessed through his posterity, yet God had made no covenant with the Gentiles comparable to his covenant with Israel. Consequently, it was in mercy to the Gentiles, as it was in faithfulness to Israel, that Christ became a servant for the benefit of both.

This truth of the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in the messianic community Paul now enforces with four Old Testament quotations. In each case he uses the LXX text, and he chooses one from the Law, one from the Prophets and two from the Writings, which are the three divisions of the Old Testament. All four quotations refer both to the Gentiles and to the worship of God, although each contains a slightly different emphasis. In the first, David, though king of Israel, announces his intention to praise God among the Gentiles, although it is not clear whether the nations are to be spectators only or active participants. *'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name'* (9b = Ps. 18:49; 2 Sa. 22:50).

In the second quotation the nations are definitely participants. Moses is represented as summoning them to rejoice in company with God's people. *Again, it says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'* (10 = Dt. 32:43). In the third quotation the psalmist also addresses all the nations directly and bids them praise Yahweh, repeating the word 'all'. *And again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples'* (11 = Ps. 117:1). Then in the fourth and final verse the prophet Isaiah predicts the rise of the Messiah,

NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).

LXX The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, third century BC.

descended from David, Jesse's son, who would rule the nations and win their confidence. *And again, Isaiah says, 'The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him'* (12 = Is. 11:10). Thus the Messiah would be simultaneously the root of Jesse and the hope of the nations.

Paul concludes the long doctrinal-ethical section of his letter with another benediction (see verse 5 for the first). *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him* (13a). The reference to joy and peace recalls the apostle's definition of the kingdom of God (14:17). Now he adds faith (*as you trust in him*) as the means by which joy and peace grow within us, and he prays that his Roman readers will be filled with both. He also anticipates that this filling will result in an overflowing: *so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit* (13b). The burden of Paul's earlier benediction (5) was unity with a view to worship; the burden of this one is 'hope'. He has already expressed his assurance that the Scriptures bring us hope (4). Now he expresses his prayer-wish that *the God of hope* may cause them to *overflow with hope*. Hope of course always looks to the future. And since Paul has just quoted Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah will be the object of the Gentiles' hope (12), we are given a clue as to what hope is in his mind. Paul is looking forward to the time the 'fulness' of both Israel and the Gentiles will have come in (11:12, 25), then to the culmination of history with the parousia, and then beyond it to the glory of the new universe which Jews and Gentiles will together inherit. Thus joy, peace, faith and hope are essential Christian qualities. If faith is the means to joy and peace, overflowing hope is their consequence, and all four are due to the power of the Holy Spirit within us.

Looking back over this whole section (14:1–15:13), which is largely devoted to how the strong should regard and treat the weak, it is particularly impressive to see how the apostle buttresses his ethical exhortations with solid theological arguments. Although we have noted six, three of them seem to be central. They concern the cross, the resurrection and the last judgment.

First, Christ died to be our Saviour. Since God has accepted the weaker brother (14:1, 3), and since Christ has accepted us (15:7), we must complete the triangle and accept one another. How could we possibly destroy those whom Christ died to save? The second fundamental argument is that Christ rose to be our Lord. This is explicitly stated (14:9). In consequence, all his people are his servants, and are accountable to him, the weak and the strong alike (14:6ff.). Thirdly, Christ is coming to be our judge. We will all stand before his judgment seat one day, and each of us will then give an account of himself or herself to God (14:10ff.). To presume to stand in judgment on others is to usurp the prerogative of God. These are the three acclamations which are made in many churches during the Lord's Supper: 'Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!' They not only inform our worship; they also influence our behaviour.

As we have tried to follow the intricacies of Paul's reasoning regarding relationships between the strong and the weak, it must sometimes have seemed very remote from our own situation. Yet there are two particular principles which Paul develops, which, especially in combination, are applicable to all churches in all places at all times. The first is the principle of faith. Everything must be done 'from faith', he writes (14:23). Again, 'each one should be fully convinced in his own mind' (14:5). We need therefore to educate our consciences by the Word of God, so that we become strong in faith, growing in settled convictions and so in Christian liberty. Secondly, there is the principle of love. Everything must be done according to love (14:15). We need therefore to remember who our fellow Christians are, especially that they are our sisters and brothers for whom Christ died, so that we honour, not despise, them; serve, not harm, them; and especially respect their consciences.

One area in which this distinction between faith and love should operate is in the difference between essentials and non-essentials in Christian doctrine and practice. Although it is not always easy to distinguish between them, a safe guide is that truths on which Scripture speaks with a clear voice are essentials, whereas whenever equally biblical Christians, equally anxious to understand and obey Scripture, reach different conclusions, these must be regarded as non-essentials. Some people glory in the so-called 'comprehensiveness' of certain denominations. But there are two kinds of comprehensiveness, principled and unprincipled.

Dr Alex Vidler has described the latter as the resolve 'to hold together in juxtaposition as many varieties of Christian faith and practice as are willing to agree to differ, so that the church is regarded as a sort of league of religions [a sort of 'United Religions', he might have said today]. I have nothing to say for such an unprincipled syncretism.' The true principle of comprehension, on the other hand, he writes, 'is that a church ought to hold the fundamentals of the faith, and at the same time allow for differences of opinion and of interpretation in secondary matters, especially rites and ceremonies ...'.⁴⁰

In fundamentals, then, faith is primary, and we may not appeal to love as an excuse to deny essential faith. In non-fundamentals, however, love is primary, and we may not appeal to zeal for the faith as an excuse for failures in love. Faith instructs our own conscience; love respects the conscience of others. Faith gives liberty; love limits its exercise. No-one has put it better than Rupert Meldenius, a name which some believe was a *nom de plume* used by Richard Baxter:

In essentials unity;
In non-essentials liberty;

⁴⁰ Alec Vidler, *Essays in Liberality* (SCM, 1957), p. 166.

In all things charity.¹

Additional Resources:

Course and Notes: Romans 14 and 15 by Mike Kruger.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/study-romans-kruger/#romans-14>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/study-romans-kruger/#romans-15>

Course Notes: Romans 14 by Mike Kruger Stumbling Block and Motivation for Good Works. <https://cdn.rts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Sermon-Notes-Romans-L37.pdf>

Romans 15:1-13 by Mike Kruger

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 364–375.

<https://cdn.rts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Sermon-Notes-Romans-L38.pdf>

Sermon: [Do Not Destroy the Work of God](https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/do-not-destroy-the-work-of-god) by John Piper, Nov. 6, 2005.
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/do-not-destroy-the-work-of-god>